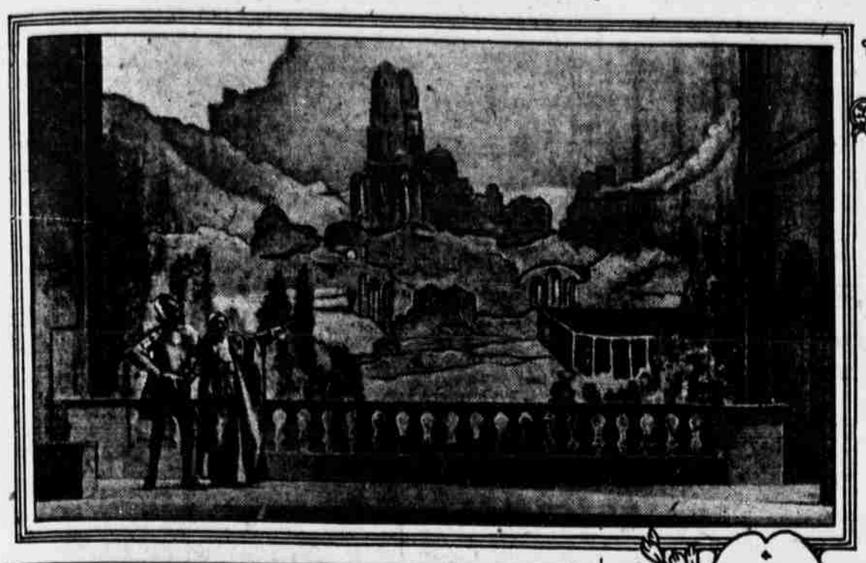
Theatrical Designer Comes Into His Own With New School of Art

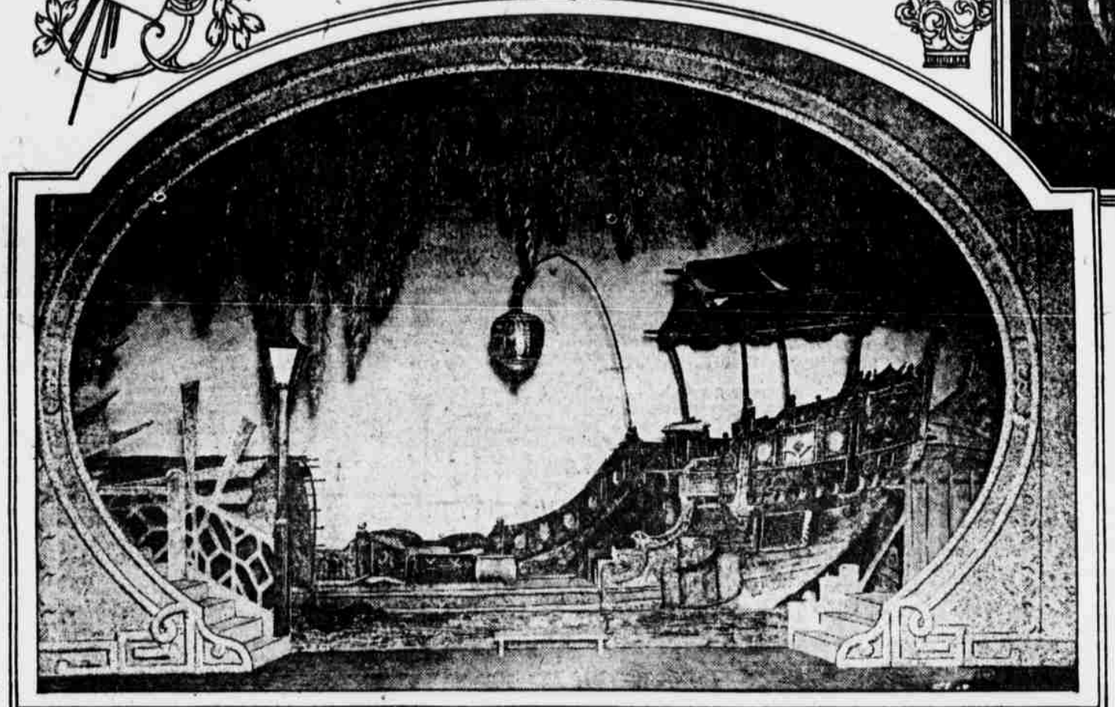


SETTING by ROLLO PETERS for the FIRST ACT of BENAVENTE'S "BONDS of INTEREST" at the GARRICK THEATRE by the THEATRE GUILD

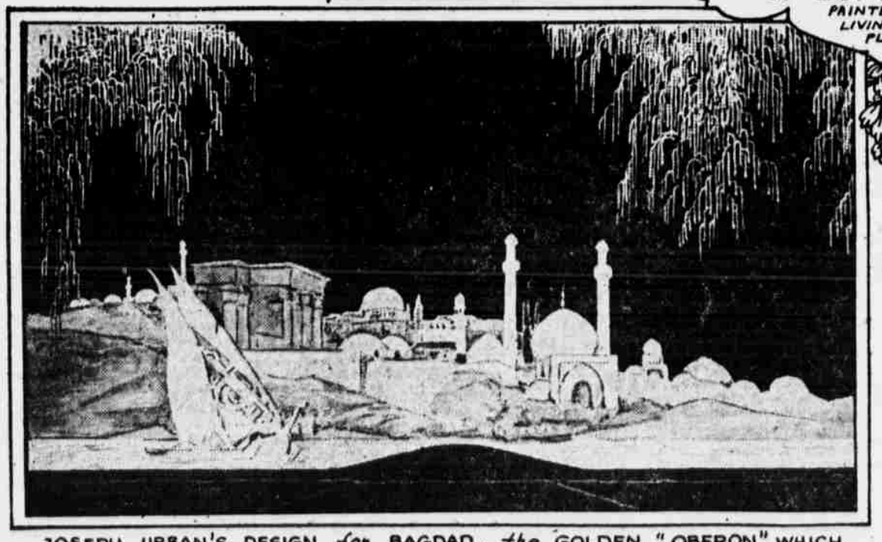
ROBERT EDMOND JONES' DESIGN for the BOUDOIR of GINEVRA'S in "THE JEST".

ROLLO PETERS' STUDY of A SPANISH GARDEN for "BONDS of INTEREST" by the THEATRE GUILD.

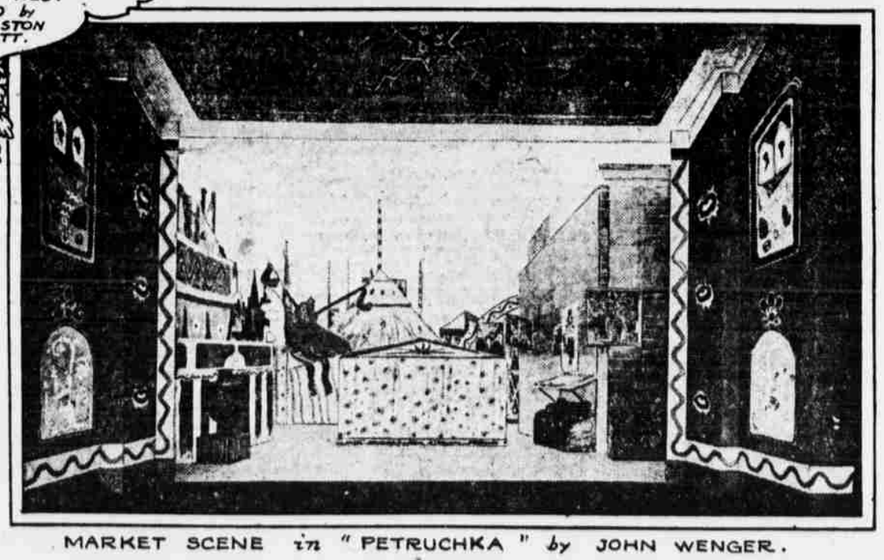
COSTUME of HELEN WESTLEY in "THE BONDS of INTEREST" DESIGNED for the THEATRE GUILD.



The LOVE BOAT SCENE in "EAST IS WEST" PAINTED by LIVINGSTON PLATT.



JOSEPH URBAN'S DESIGN for BAGDAD, the GOLDEN "OBERON" WHICH WAS VIEWED at the METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE.



MARKET SCENE in "PETRUCHKA" by JOHN WENGER.

New York Playhouses Reveal Striking Examples of Work Which Is Winning Higher Recognition for the Genius of the Stage Painter

By LUCIEN CLEVES.

IN a Fifth avenue art gallery there was recently held an exhibition of the new art of the theatre, which is making its way steadily in the playhouses of this country. It is not the kind of "art" which is often hallowed by such surroundings. Indeed, painters, especially those who have not been invited to take any part in this new movement, and critics are inclined to be mildly amused at the pretensions of the new movement in classing itself with the art of painting and sculpture as they are represented by the gallery exhibitions. They do not see that a little restraint in the use of paint and canvas, a somewhat more tasteful manipulation of color and, above all, the mechanical arrangement of lights which is a feature of the new school of theatrical decoration—they do not see why these qualities in the work of stage painters and designers should entitle their work to take any place in the broad world of art. But it may be that the apostles of this new movement believe that if acting as it exists to-day can rightfully be described as an art any other details of stage paraphernalia are entitled to the same distinction.

Its Exponents Call It an Art.

But ever since Gordon Craig began to struggle with the conventions of stage decoration in order to show that simplicity, when it was poetically conceived, might stimulate the imagination more than the laboriously minute attempt to reproduce realistically the scene demanded in a play the new art —malgre the critics—has been making its way. In Europe, Max Reinhardt and Stanislawsky have done much to prove the merit of Mr. Craig's theories, which have gradually come to take their place among the artistic credo of all the new men in the theatre of every land. Jacques Copeau showed this season his application of the ideas of Craig and his successors to a French literary theatre, occasionally with surprisingly beautiful results. But it has remained for the American followers of this new principle to exhibit here its excellencies adapted to our own uses. The illustrations show the successful application of the new stage "art" to some of the current dramas.

The Place of Arthur Hopkins.

No other manager of this city has welcomed the tendencies of the new stage designers with the same cordiality that Arthur Hopkins has shown; so he has come to stand for that movement in our theatre. Just now he may be said to be standing for it with the most satisfactory results. Mr. Hopkins at the beginning of his career as an independent manager was fortunate enough to annex Robert Edmond Jones as his stage designer. Mr. Jones had done the picturesque decorations for Granville Barker when he mounted at the old Wallack's Theatre "The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife." Mr. Jones succeeded in obliterating by his skill in line and color the vacuous fable of Anatole France which would otherwise have sent a twentieth century audience to sleep. Maybe he was also responsible for the settings of "The Doctor's Dilemma," which in style were not unlike what he did for "The Devil's Garden" two years later. At all events, he associated himself with Mr. Hopkins. He is mentioned first, since the two are just now enjoying with "The Jest" at the Plymouth Theatre the most completely successful event of the designer's skill. The popular success of the drama is, of course, overwhelming, while critical praise of its investiture has been unanimous.

Last of Several Such Productions.

One need only compare the striking and characteristic pictures that Mr. Jones has made to frame this play with the conventional and operatic settings in Paris to realize the skill of the American artist. Various points in Mr. Jones's scenery have impressed themselves on all who saw them. The towering doorways of the banquet hall which open to an indigo sky, the cerulean bareness of *Ginevra's* apartment with its fading frescoes and the massive pillar of the Medici dungeons projected against the darkness of its mysterious depths are likely to be remembered by those who are least susceptible to such influences. Then the figure of the painter wrapped in his flowing coat of ivory satin, the splotch of crimson made by the fallen draperies of the Pisan mercenary and the mediæval nudishness of the courtesan are details that will affect every spectator in the degree of his reaction to beauty. It is true that in this play of the Renaissance the artist's opportunities are unusual. But the Paris scene painters who set out to embody the architectural ideas of the Florence of the magnificent Lawrence had at least equal chance to distinguish themselves although reproductions of their work do not proclaim that they did.

Mr. Jones has not always had the same success in his efforts. Indeed, his artistic fortunes have varied almost as much as his manager's. After his work with Granville Barker he went to Mr. Hopkins and demonstrated in "The Devil's Garden" that after all the contention of his critics that an interior needs to be no more than a room so long as it is of this day and place. There was an eloquence all its own to some of his interiors in this play. Then in the iridescent piffle of Clare Kummer he did some exquisitely appropriate creme meringue decorations with greater breadth of subject and possible treatment in "The Happy Ending." His design of the inner scenes in the Stadium performances of the masque of "Caliban" won him fame and were later skilfully turned to the uses of another medium in the different Boston representations of the piece. Concerning his work and his future influence on the stage of this country Kenneth Macgowan, who is one of his interpreters, has written, after praising greatly the scenery and dresses, that Mr. Jones did for a ballet called "Till Eulenspiegel," done by the Diaghileff troup at the Manhattan Opera House, the following:

"Through much of his association with Mr. Hopkins Mr. Jones has had to deal first hand with this matter of setting present day comedies and dramas. The amount to which his work has heightened the effectiveness and the success of these pieces could be recognized by any one who saw the Clare Kummer farces, 'Good Gracious, Annabelle' and 'A Successful Calamity.' Its catholicity has been extraordinary.

"The present season has demonstrated Mr. Jones's powers in a singular manner, because it has allowed him to range from the opalescence of the Kummer soap bubble, 'Be Calm, Camilla,' to the strident conflicts of the inter-racial drama, 'The Gentile Wife': from the simplified abstractions of 'Redemption' to the simplified reality of 'The Jest.'

There are many aspects to the final impression left by Mr. Jones's four years of work in and around Broadway. Putting aside those qualities of simplification, suggestion, composition, which must be the easy accomplishment of any artist who pretends to success in the modern theatre, three things stand out as typical of the man.

One, certainly, is the exceptional genius that he shows for costumes. Another is his skill with light. "The Jest" is built far more of these two than of proportion or color of canvas. It happens that Mr. Jones is also a craftsman; hardly an object, whether fabric or gold plate or helmet, but bears the marks of his actual and personal touch.

These three things—genius with physical, three dimensional costumes, skill with light and the desire and ability to shape each object of the play to a precise perfection—have curious connections that are reflected in Mr. Jones's desire for personal recreations of the theatres, which go far beyond his directoral experiments with the Negro Players and his Milwaukee summer season to a drama of new shapes and new ideas. He has barely scratched this in his designs for Percy MacKaye's plays and masques, "The Evergreen Tree," "The Roll Call," and "Washington." His unpublished "Cenci," set in moving choruses in the centre of a sort of prize ring, touches more closely his ultimate goal. In this barely begun campaign for a theatre of dimensions yet unmeasured Mr. Jones is still a revolutionary, still young, still unprofessional, and the lonely leader of a largely invisible "league of youth."

Metropolitan Opera House Cordial.

All the noted designers of New York have had an opportunity to show their skill this year. Joseph Urban, one of the first noted artists that has turned his attention to the theatre as a field of expression; Rollo Peters, with the Theatre Guild, Livingston Platt in—of all the plays in the world to inspire an artist—"East Is West," and other American scene designers have had their opportunity this season. And this cannot be neglected as an indication of the growth of the professional managers in the new school of stage art.

The Metropolitan Opera House has shown itself this year hospitable to the younger scene designers as well as to those of more established reputation. Thus John Weiger did the scenery for the revival of "Petrushka," which has been pronounced by no less an authority than Edyziegla his favorite ballet. Boris Annisfeld of the school, if not the atelier of Bakst, did the decorations for "La Reine Fiamette" of Xavier Leroux, while the highly praised scenery of "Oberon" was designed by Joseph Urban, one of the first of the noted European scenic designers to awaken the consciousness of the American manager. Mr. Wenger has so far made his art democratic as to be one of the men called in to contribute to the beauty of the Rialto and the Rivoli theatres. Rollo Peters formed his own association, which should represent all that he thinks the stage should stand for. This is the Theatre Guild, which recently attracted attention because of its very artistic production of "The Bonds of Interest" by the Spaniard, Jacinto Benavente, and during the last week launched an unsual success in "John Ferguson," by the brilliant Irish novelist and playwright, St. John G. Ervine, thus justifying the words of Benavente, who said that to do good art is to do good business. And in Rollo Peters, the directing spirit of the organization, we find the person who most strongly illustrates the characteristics of the Theatre Guild.

Rollo Peters's Rise.

There was a time, not so very long ago either, when it was unusual to read a detailed description of the settings and costumes of a play and the name of their creator. But that day has past. The theatrical designer has come into his own. And now in Rollo Peters we have for the first time the actor-designer, or rather, the designer-actor, for Mr. Peters was a designer long before becoming an actor.

Born in Paris of American parents, Mr. Peters returned to this country when a young boy and received his academic education at Monterey, Cal. His father is a noted landscape painter, president of the Western Society of Painters, whose work was last seen in New York in 1900 at an exhibition of his works held at the Union League Club. It was while still a lad in Monterey that he became interested in the theatre. Nance O'Neil and Wilton Lackaye, who used to play there when on tour and were guests at his father's home, are probably responsible to a large extent for his presence in the theatrical world to-day.

Young Peters returned to Europe, where he first studied portraiture, later going to Munich, where he learned much of modern stagecraft, lighting and design.

Returning to this country only a very few years ago, Peters at once became identified with the theatre. He attributes much of his success to the experience gained while with the Washington Square Players, for with a frequent change of bill, and being entirely free to execute his own ideas, he gained that which it would otherwise have taken him years to acquire.

The scenery and costumes which Mr. Peters designed for "The Bonds of Interest" have attracted considerable attention both in the artistic and theatrical world and have undoubtedly been unsurpassed in the New York theatre this season for sheer beauty and brilliance. In view of which one cannot help smiling when Mr. Peters says: "Frankly, I consider the stage setting which I employ through the four acts of 'John Ferguson' far superior to my work in 'The Bonds of Interest.' I will tell you why. The kitchen which I have designed is so absolutely in the atmosphere of the play itself that one scarcely notices it. In a play everything should so harmonize as to create and deepen the atmosphere and intent of the play itself, and that scenery which attracts the attention of the audience to itself is harmful to the play. The kitchen is realistic enough, but not over realistic. If it were cluttered up with rolling pins and nutmeg graters and things of that sort the audience would be so interested in examining them that it would lose *John Ferguson's* opening words as the curtain rose, and that would be bad."

"My first acting was done as the "The Grasshopper" and "Madame Sand," the creation of Philip Moeller, a director of the Theatre Guild, to whom credit is due for the excellent production of "The Bonds of Interest."

Joseph Urban's principal success at the Metropolitan Opera House this year has been the new setting for "Oberon," of which the distant towers of Bagdad are shown here. In the Austrian designer the theatre has one of the most noted as well as one of the most versatile of all the men who have turned their attention to the stage from other branches of art.

The famous Austrian artist, architect and illustrator was born in Vienna on May 26, 1872. In this city he began and finished his art studies. The first reward of his talent came in 1897, when he won the Austrian-Kaiser prize for his illustrations to the "Mask of the Red Death" (Edgar Allan Poe). He alone as artist architect ever received this distinction. In May, 1898, for the German Government Printing Office in Berlin, he illustrated "The Chronicle of the Three Sisters," a book by I. A. K. Museus, receiving the Austrian State Grand Medal at the International Artists Exhibition in Vienna that year.

His First Success.

For the Bosnia-Herzegovinian Government he built and fully decorated three pavilions at the Kaiser Jubilee Exposition. In the same year Mr. Urban was elected by a group of modern artists in Vienna the president of their association and while in this official position built and decorated their exhibit hall in Vienna, arranging more than twenty exhibitions of modern art. He won the competition of the Austrian architects for a bridge and landscape gardening accompaniment connecting Symphony Hall with the Palace of Fine Arts in Vienna. This was opened to public use by the Emperor Francis Joseph on the fortieth anniversary of his reign. On this occasion Mr. Urban received the first prize and the Austrian gold cross with crown.

His chief work in 1899 was to design, construct and decorate and entirely furnish the castle of Count Carl Esterhazy in Pressburg, Hungary.

In 1900 Mr. Urban won the international competition for the Czar's bridge across the Neva, getting first prize. He was then sent to Paris by the Austrian Government to build and decorate the Austrian artists' pavilion, and the judges of the exposition there awarded to him the grand prize for the interior decorations and the grand medal for his Hungarian castle sketches. Following upon these honors he was presented by the Austrian Emperor with the Order of Francis Joseph.

In 1901 the Austrian Government sent Mr. Urban to Missouri, U. S. A., to build and decorate, in cooperation with other artists, several pavilions for the St. Louis Exposition. For the interior decorations of the art pavilion he received the Grand Prize of St. Louis, for the carpet in same the grand medal and for his own exhibitions the Grand Prize of the Art Exposition.

After these successes he supervised the construction at Dresden of the Austrian Horticultural Exposition, first of its kind in Europe under artistic supervision. Here he had conferred upon him the Order of the House of the King of Saxony. Then Mr. Urban received from the Crown Prince Luitpold the highest Bavarian distinctions for four international art expositions in Munich: the grand medal (gold) of the City of Venice (possessed by very few artists) for the permanent Austrian art pavilion at the International Art Exposition at Venice. For the German Kaiser and under his personal protection Mr. Urban next illustrated an historic work, "The German Hall of Glory," of which only one hundred copies were printed for museums for about 1,200 marks ($300) each. On completing this work he received a personal note of appreciation in the Emperor's own handwriting.

For the Austrian Emperor he next illustrated a similar book, called "Book of Honors and Victories," after which he devoted himself again to architecture and built many villas near Vienna, in Lainz and Semmering, with all details of interior decorations and furnishings. He also won the competition for the town hall of the city of Vienna, a colossal piece of architectural interior decoration, also building same, together with other artists. As an appreciation, his name, with those of his comrades, was engraved in a bronze tablet in the building.

Mr. Urban then illustrated twelve fairy tales by Grimm, twelve fairy tales by Andersen, sixteen Austrian children's songs, twelve pictures of children's dreams by the German poet Sergel. They were edited by German and Austrian publishing houses and it was through this that theatrical managers became interested in his work. The demand for these works was so great that he decided to devote his

(Continued on Following Page.)